

Dancing Queen by Pienuniek

by Words of Love for Meli

Category: Twilight

Genre: Humor, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Bella, Edward

Status: Completed

Published: 2016-04-10 13:07:43

Updated: 2016-04-26 14:39:45

Packaged: 2016-04-27 20:35:33

Rating: M

Chapters: 5

Words: 22,899

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

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AH

1. Her Past

Pien for Meli

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Romance

Chapter 1 Her past.

The large group was having the best time around Bella, who sat in the middle of them with a scowl on her face. There was so much she should be happy about but she just couldn't feel it with this group of sycophants around her.

Today was her twenty-fifth birthday.

The day she came into her inheritance.

The day her guardian, Renee, had to step back and give over the reins of her life. The day she could finally decide her own fate. Yeah, right. Renee still ruled the roost with this party, because the guests around her were primarily Renee's friends and their entourage.

Renee herself wasn't happy either. Her cozy position of spending two-thirds of Bella's monthly stipend had come to an end. That morning, Bella's solicitor had turned up and offered her an envelope. It held a new contract; an offer to stay on as housekeeper. The nasty

part was the list of duties the housekeeper was to perform. Renee had hoped to live a life of luxury by seducing the man of the house. She was fired from her first position for just that. When Catherine Swan, Bella's mother had died just weeks after the girl was born, Renee had seen the opportunity that position held and jumped at the chance to nurse the grieving father of a newborn into a new life of keeping a wife in leisure. It didn't work out that way. The only woman Charlie Swan ever looked out for was his daughter, Isabella. The spitting image of his late wife and the light of his life.

From the age of four, Charlie took his Bells with him to the stables of the Cygnet Ranch. That name always caused a buzz on the tracks, because at least six of the last ten winning horses came from that stable. Any horse with the prefix Cygnet to its name gained high praise and prizes. Yes, Charlie Swan was a well-known race horse breeder and he groomed his daughter to follow in his footsteps. As a little girl, she learned to ride and at the age of ten, she asked her father to be allowed to try and learn dressage. Fifteen years later, the stable's prefix had also become a household name in that branch of equestrian sports.

When Bella was sixteen, she was in full control of the breeding at the stables. She had a knack for pairing mares and stallions to get the best results in both race and dressage horses. Charlie took care of the business side of things, although he still worked on the horses as hard as any groom in his employ.

That became his downfall. He'd hired a new stable hand and while he was still awaiting the background checks, the lowlife had allowed his horse thief friends access to the stables. Charles was in late at night to check on a mare that was ready to foal when he disturbed the thieves in their illegal exploits. He was able to activate the alarm but was shot in the back for his troubles, leaving a distraught Bella alone to run the business all by herself.

Charlie had left everything to his daughter, including a letter in which he warned her of Renee. Renee knew nothing about that the letter, however, Bella had always been wary of the woman's intentions. Not able to win over the man, she now recruited her friend's daughters to keep Bella in line. She was, after all, Bella's guardian and as such could make sure the girl kept her in the money. The last nine years the three of them had done everything to undermine Bella's self-esteem. Alice and Rose had declared themselves Bella's friends and started to form her into a socialite, against Bella's own wishes. Renee put in her two cents, pushing the girls on her. Their parents were clients of Cygnet Ranch, or at least in the same social circle. Bella's so-called friends hadn't actually taken notice of the things Bella appreciated, though.

Bella was a breeches and T-shirt kind of girl; she didn't use make-up or perfume. On a typical day she put on her breeches and went to the stables, she took care of the training of most of the foals, making sure they were indeed suited for some kind of top equestrian spot. She succeeded in both race and dressage equally, although she worked mostly with the dressage foals.

It was more than obvious that Bella enjoyed the companionship of horses a whole lot more than her mall-traipsing, self-imposed friends. Their overbearing ways made her shy and clumsy, and something they mercilessly exploited her shortcomings to put her

down.

The fact that she refused to wear heels over two inches made them declare her unladylike. When she was in college, Renee should have taken care of the business. But Renee, her friends, and her friend's daughters were all afraid of horses. Maybe afraid was the wrong word. They thought horses were fine from afar, but up close, they thought them to be stinking beasts that made you dirty. Being around them was not a fashion statement. A horse also would devour your clothing budget if you didn't watch out! Alice alone had three, room-sized walk-in closets that held her clothes. In those rooms, she had created seven sections, one for each weekday. Alice was a bit OCD about her clothes. Each day of the week had a predetermined color. People knew what day of the week it was by one look at her. She hated pastels; pink was a pastel to her. She had a section for each color of the rainbow. Shades of a color would be acceptable as long as everything she wore that day fell into that color scheme. She had a fourth room that was dedicated to shoes and accessories; getting dressed could take her anywhere from two to five hours depending on the occasion.

Rose took Alice's advice in clothes but her focus was more on enhancing her plain exterior in a more permanent way. At twenty-five she had a mouth full of bright, white facings, permanently pouting lips that looked ready to burst, combined with a surprised expression that had been Botoxed on her face. She had implants in both her chest and rear to get curves on her rail thin, I'm-hungry body. Her hair was blonde from a salon that made it look good all over her body, with weekly touch ups.

Their combined idea of dinner was a salad at one of the best restaurants in town for the price of a complete cow. Bella loved a good, home-cooked meal, something substantial after a hard day's work. The fact that she had natural curves and muscles made the girls and Renee call her fat. Her ribs couldn't be counted that was true, but her BMI was squarely in the healthy range, neither too high nor too low.

Most of the time Bella could avoid them, even if they kept bombarding her with demanding texts and voicemails. Her work on the ranch, thank God, gave her enough excuses to stay out of their way. That didn't work for Renee's organized birthday party. That's why she now sat there, moping, between ridiculous amounts of presents, most of which wouldn't see the light of day after they were brought inside.

The first four packages were from Renee and her friends. They gave her three, very flattering dresses that didn't contain enough fabric to cover her even if she wore them all at once. She put on her polite, fake, smile at those, but the fourth present had put the scowl back on her face. Renee found it prudent to give her a Weight Watchers subscription. She hastily put it aside to grab another gift bag. It produced the skimpiest workout clothes in a fluorescent yellow color of which Bella had never encountered. Where did they get this stuff? Alice giggled and pushed an envelope in Bella's hands commenting that those workout clothes would come in handy.

With trepidation, Bella opened the envelope and read the gift certificate inside. Rose piped up that it should help her with her clumsy nature. Bella was beet red, and that color changed to purple when the rage at her would be friends 'gift.' They had given her an

eight week, pole-dancing course. Alice made sure that Bella knew that it was on Wednesdays, 'their' day and the girls would pick her up an hour in advance so they could all go together. Bella almost burst with rage, which only grew when the girls giggled their hearts out at her expression. She knew they wouldn't let it go, she knew she would be subjected to eight hours of torment with those bitches in the gallery.

Happy birthday to her.

Wednesday arrived too soon in Bella's book. After she had taken care of her personal horses, she ate lunch and took fifteen minutes to dress somewhat Alice approved, dumped her new workout clothes in a duffle bag with a towel and a water bottle. She then sat in the living room with a good book to wait for the controlling 'friends' to pick her up. She'd spun her life like this, curtailing those girls to two moments in her week; Wednesday afternoons and Saturday evenings. With a sigh, she got up at two o'clock, picked up her bag and relocated to the front porch. They said they'd pick her up at two but knowing them, she still would have about half an hour to wait. To her surprise they arrived at ten past two, the possible humiliation they could dole out must have had some effect on their grooming skills, or their inner clockâ€¦ Nah. The moment she slid into the back of Alice's Wednesday car, a canary yellow Porsche Cayenne, Bella knew she should have driven herself to the studio. The name was familiar, but she had no idea where it was. The certificate held no address and that was why the already demeaning twosome had talked her into driving her there. She could have saved herself a lot of grief. Her jeans were too mundane; her blouse was not only out of style but a Friday blouse on a Wednesday to boot, and her duffle bag a crime against fashion. Rose added that she might have thought to tweeze her eyebrows; the unibrow was out of fashion. Bella just nodded her head and forgot what they said. Unbeknownst to the two harping bitches in the front seat, inside her duffle bag, a Dictaphone recorded everything said in the car. She had adopted that strategy soon after she had digested everything Charlie had told her in his letter. In the wall safe in her room, she had a large collection of tapes and memory cards, collected over the last nine years.

After they had put her down enough, the two in the front seat ignored her, talking fashion and a possible nose job for Rose; she was convinced her nose wasn't pointy enough.

The moment the car turned into the car park near the two-business building, Bella knew why she thought the name of the dance studio was familiar. The other business in the building held her vet clinic. Emmett and Jasper had been lucky enough to get help to set up their practice from the foster son of Carlisle and Esme Cullen, her neighbors. He had bought the entire building to help his college friends. Bella was quite amused that she didn't even know his name since Carlisle was tight-lipped about his foster son. The only things Bella had learned was that their foster son lived on their property in his own cabin, that he was very private and didn't like strangers to know anything about him. Emmett and Jasper were just as protective of him as well.

After Charlie had died, Bella knew her business would go down the drain if she didn't have any help in running it. She knew Renee should help, as her guardian, but she also knew Renee hated horses and only knew how to spend money, not how to make it. She went to her

neighbors and asked them for help. Ever since then, they left the training decisions to her but kept an eye on the business side of things. As Bella's education took shape, they took more and more of a back seat until they were just the advisors.

Upon exiting the car, Alice grabbed her arm and towed her inside. When she pushed through the doors, she slammed into Jasper, who came rushing out of the office, a box of supplies in his arms. He cursed and looked down at the five foot four Alice on her six-inch heels, a scowl prominent on his face. Alice took one look at him and started to bat her eyelashes at him. He gave her a cursory glance before looking at who was with her. He greeted Bella with fervor, telling her he had to go to the Cullen Ranch because one of their best jumpers had colic. Alice huffed and ramped up the pouty lips and fluttering eyelashes. Jasper scowled at her and left the building at a run, eager to get to his car. Alice stated with confidence that that man would be her husband; she had just seen her future.

Rose entered the building and grabbed Bella's other arm. She completed the tow, now two persons long toward the dance studio. Bella dug her heels in once they passed the door.

"What are you doing? You know I'll go now, because you'll only go inside with me if you try it at the same time!" She hissed in an angry whisper.

"Don't be absurd, Bella. Be glad we gave you these lessons, maybe you'll learn some elegance and sex appeal, it should at least be good exercise for that fat ass of yours. But this part is our gift to ourselves we're going to watch your clumsy ass get into trouble." Rose spoke in a whisper shout.

Bella's eyes sprung full of tears and her face heated in unadulterated rage. She was so angry that her voice gave out, and she couldn't retaliate. The queens of mean had reached a new depth, she wasn't even sure they were still on this side of the earth. She should tear herself loose and run for cover with Emmett in the vet clinic. Before she could act on her plan, though, an ice-cold voice spoke to her wardens.

"Our lessons are private, you should've noticed that when you bought the package. Furthermore, we don't allow bullies into our establishment. Your remarks plainly put you in that category. So if you do not intend to attend the lessons yourself, there's the door please close it behind you."

A beautiful, statuesque woman strode their way, her eyes blazing, their stare unwavering on Alice and Rose. The girls were so flustered that they were caught, they dropped Bella's arms like hot potatoes and faced the woman dressed in a tight, light blue polo shirt with the studio's logo on the pocket and a simple, white, flaring skirt falling down to her calves. Alice twitched at the colors but found her voice the fastest; her brain, however, had difficulty keeping up as she blurted,

"But we gave her the lessons! We should, at least, be able to watch her fall on her ass!"

"That just crossed the line even more. I'll tell you one more time, GET OUT, or I'll call the authorities and tell them that I've

unwanted intruders here."

The woman spoke through clenched teeth. Her natural blonde hair slicing the air with her movement as her arm stabbed in the direction of the door. The slut sisters scurried out of the building as fast as they could, followed by the enraged stare of the woman and the bemused one of her next-door neighbor, Emmett. He doubled over in laughter when Rose's left heel became stuck in a crack of the pavement and broke off, landing the Barbie doll sprawling on the blacktop. The most unladylike stream of curses left her mouth when she limped on one heel to Alice's car, holding the pieces of her color-of-the-day-defying, red-soled shoe in her hand.

The woman took a deep breath, rolled her shoulders and turned to face Bella.

"Are you Bella Swan?" Bella couldn't speak yet, but she nodded. "My name is Kate, my husband, Garrett, and I own this studio. Looking at your agitated state your eagerness to learn to pole dance is as big as mine regarding meeting clowns, which is non-existent to be clear."

That did it, with her flippant remark, Kate broke through Bella's rage and she laughed.

"That's about right, they forced me to come. I think they're now bitching about it being a waste of money. Well at least I halved my bitch exposure for the next eight weeks. They booked me on Wednesday afternoons themselves. Even if they won't know I'm not going it's the best excuse ever."

Kate looked perturbed, "All our classes are the same rate, isn't there something else a little less provocative you'd like to try. Our best ballroom instructor is present today even though his agenda is empty."

Bella thought about it. She loved the cooperation between herself and her horse when she worked on the choreography. The possibility to experience that with another person could be interesting. She took a full minute to consider her options; an entirely free afternoon, or a new experience.

"You know, I'm here now so I'm going to try it. If I don't like it I can always take the afternoon off. Thank you, for suggesting it."

Kate smiled and escorted Bella to one of the private instruction rooms. It was one of the smaller ones because she thought it would be beginner level box stepping.

"Wait here; our instructor will be with you in a minute."

2. They Meet

Dancing Queen

Chapter 2 They Meet.

Edward sat in the staff room waiting for possible walk-ins, he liked

to teach his skills to others every once in a while. His own teachers were more than happy to let him do that as a hobby. He didn't need the money, his computer skills were even better than his dancing ones; he'd built software for web shops and had sold prescriptions of it to some of the biggest players in that arena. He kept the rights to the software and guaranteed updates and patches for as long as the prescription lasted. The rent and royalties had made him free to do as he pleased for the rest of his life.

He knew that his mind was scary to a lot of people, even his own parents. They had tried to beat the smart out of him when he read better than they could at age four. They didn't do it the smart way and Edward was removed from his parents' home and put into foster care. The only family he was still in contact with was his maternal grandparents who had disowned their daughter for choosing a convicted criminal as her husband. When they found out that Edward was placed with their good friends Carlisle and Esme Cullen, they sat with their lawyer the same afternoon and instated a large trust fund that would give him monthly stipends until it would come available in its entirety at Edward's eighteenth birthday. Edward always kept his own last name, Masen, and because he still had interested living relatives, he couldn't be adopted.

Carlisle and Esme had both taught as professors at the local college, but their main focus had always been their show jump horses. They homeschooled the very smart little boy they fostered. They thought it more prudent, a regular school would have been boring for him. His fellow classmates would be just starting to learn to read while he was struggling with their entire library; Jung, Descartes, and Shakespeare. His school years ended when he graduated high school summa cum laude at age ten. He then took some time to work on himself. His mind might have functioned as an adult, the Cullens treated him as such, and after an evening discussing his options they made a joint decision that he would go into therapy to help him grow emotionally. He would also assist them on the ranch training the horses. He wasn't interested in going to the gym, but after he had seen Garrett and Kate win the world championship double he was mesmerized by the precise, elegant sport. He wrote them a letter explaining his interest in the most eloquent way he could muster. Six weeks later, he started his ballroom training.

It appeared that he was just as adept at using his body as he was at using his mind. He had a natural rapport with the horses and soon trained the best of the best before they went to their athlete riders. Kate became his dance partner while Garrett trained him. He told them he wanted to be perfect but had no interest whatsoever in joining the circuit. It was just something he did for a hobby.

He was deep into bug fixing some new program he'd written when Kate's raised voice ripped him from his concentration. He stood up, shot to the door of the staff room, and looked around with caution, his phone in his hand in case it was necessary to call the cops. He saw her admonishing two rather slutty girls, both from top to bottom in bright yellow clothes. He saw a third person hidden behind Kate, he assumed a third girl because everything but a blue-clad arm was obscured by Kate's healthy but slender body. After a third withering glare from Kate, the sunshine girls left with considerable speed. He couldn't see out of the building from his vantage point but he knew something happened as Emmett doubled over laughing in the door of the vet clinic. Danger averted he went back to his laptops to restart his

line-by-line check of the program.

Before Kate left Bella alone in the training room lined with mirrors, a sound system and a comfortable couch next to it in a corner, she asked what shoe size Bella wore. Her tennis shoes wouldn't do her any good for ballroom dancing. After that inquiry, she left Bella alone. Bella looked in the mirrors and tried a few steps, her motions changing from human to more horse like steps. The steps she was trained in to work out a horse choreography on music. After two minutes she felt ridiculous and plopped herself onto the couch. Elbows on her knees and her head down she thought over everything that happened; her feelings dulling from rage to complete mortification. What would these people think of her letting the color twins bully her? Her courage left her and now the tears weren't of anger, they were of a feeling of complete helplessness, almost dejection. She was so tired of dealing with Renee and the disaster twins. She had to find a way to get rid of them soon. But the tenacious threesome wouldn't give up easily.

Edward walked to the private practice room clutching the shoebox Kate gave him in his hands. He still felt awkward meeting new people, human interaction never had been his strong suit. After a deep breath, he opened the door. His eyes roamed the room halting on the hunched female figure sitting on the edge of the couch, her luscious mahogany locks hiding her features. He noticed her soft black jeans and a blouse in the same blue fabric that he had spied around Kate. Even hunched her figure was elegant. His entrance hadn't resulted in a reaction from her, so he cleared his throat.

The throat clearing pulled Bella from her thoughts â€| she hadn't noticed that the door had been opened. She raised her head, her eyes traveled over neat black shoes, black slacks with a sewn-in crease spanned over muscular thighs. She blushed when her eyes went over a more than decent package behind the zipper. A simple black belt followed by a dark blue button-down neatly tucked in with the studio's logo embroidered on the breast pocket where the shirt spanned just enough to hint at the muscles behind it. Bella's blush deepened when she realized her perusal of his body took longer than necessary. Her eyes snapped up to his, an apology on the tip of her tongue. However, when their eyes met, the words evaporated. Suddenly all her problems seemed to be trivial, with him at her side she could tackle anything. It was the strangest thing, but she felt at home.

While Edward could feel her eyes caress his body, his eyes tried to devour every new detail of her face that was revealed. Her dainty nose and high cheekbones were the first. Then, to his surprise, those cheekbones took on a faint pink color. When he felt her eyes travel across his abdomen, he couldn't hold back the small grin that twitched at his lips when he understood where that blush came from. When her eyes went over his chest, his smile faltered when he noticed her eyes to be red-rimmed. She had been crying. The burn of her gaze on his chest made the pain disappear. She seemed to like what she saw, he guessed by her deepening blush. Her intense gaze started to make him a bit shy, his ears looked decidedly red. As if she noticed his discomfort, her eyes shot to his. Their eyes locked and every discomfort left Edward's body, the loneliness that had been his companion all his life crumbled to dust.

This woman was his destiny.

They both stared at each other slack jawed, taken off guard by the feelings running through their bodies after not having even spoken a word. Edward stepped forward extending his hand as if he wanted to cup her face.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" He said.

"More than â€¦ Did I fall asleep? Is this a dream? I was sitting here trying to find out how to work out my problems and in walks the man of my dreams. Are you sure this is happening?"

Bella became the reddest she'd been after her word vomit. Edward's ears were blazing too; even his cheekbones had some color to them. But his smile was beaming. It was only then that Bella noticed just how stunning he was. A sharp angled scruffy jaw, soft looking, kissable lips and the most incredible, blazing green eyes. She once again got lost in those eyes.

Edward also looked at her face she was a dream. Heart-shaped face, an adorable little nose shadowing pouty lips. A natural beauty that shone through the light dusting of make-up, but the stunning wells of her eyes drew his gaze; the depthless brown seemed to grow even deeper. He had no idea how long they lingered staring at each other. He knew they were linked forever but they still didn't know each other's name. He wrenched himself free from her gaze to try and regain some composure.

"I'm Edward Masen, and I'll be your instructor today â€¦ Oh, forget the formalities! You mesmerized me too, please allow me to help you with these shoes and we'll get to know each other while we're dancing. I don't think I will let you go after."

His ears and cheeks once again tinged red from his own bold efforts. He knelt down before her and for the first time was enveloped in her scent, the enticing aroma held no trace of artificial alteration. He hated people who doused themselves in perfume or aftershave. He, himself, did use it but his bottle lasted ages. He had the scent designed for him and could special order it. Rather than disguising his natural scent, it enhanced it. Bella was hit by it and almost swooned. It sent a shiver down her spine. They were once again frozen in their mutual admiration. Each of them wore a soft smile, his hands, out of his control, went on with their task of removing her shoes. He then opened Kate's box and looked down on a pair of dark blue kitten-heeled dancing shoes. Grabbing the right one and her right heel, he had to stifle his reaction. The warmth coursing through him at the contact blew him away. Over his head Bella gasped, she had never felt something like that when she touched someone. His peculiar hair color had her attention, as had the unruly nature. His hair seemed built up from blonde, brown, and red strands mixed so thoroughly the overall color was close to bronze. Without thought, she ran her fingers through it and reveled in its softness.

Edward sat frozen in front of her, her fingers playing with his hair made his feelings run deeper than he had ever felt. It was then that he realized he wasn't falling; he'd fallen for her the moment their eyes first locked. It bubbled inside him and he knew that he couldn't and shouldn't keep it there. Her shoes were finished; he grabbed her from the couch and twirled her around the room.

"It's the most beautiful day of my life, for I've found the other half of my soul. I love you, sweet girl, and I don't even know your name yet. I'm completely sure that you're the woman of my dreams."

The twirling made Bella giggle like a little girl. Her head and heart filled with excited butterflies that couldn't make it to her stomach. This was ridiculous wasn't it, it wasn't fast this was off the scale. The meanies always talked about acceptable things during falling in love. Timelines that just had to be followed. However, Bella recognized an enormous difference between what they found acceptable and her own situation. They talked about falling in love, but even after countless tries of their acceptable timeline, the only thing they did was fall in lust with men. Her heart said go for it, her head told her she fell and landed in the safest arms, she wasn't falling anymore she was already there.

"I'm Bella Swan, and I love you too."

She said it with total conviction.

Edward heard her words and set off in another set of twirls, keeping Bella against him so that her feet were off the floor, his emerald eyes were dancing with such happiness he'd never felt before. The best thing was that he saw it mirrored in Bella's eyes with the same intensity. He gave her a short hard kiss to the lips, withdrawing at once, "Let's get doing what we're here for, shall we? We have the rest of our lives to figure out the rest."

Her answering nod had him placing her on her feet for the first time in her dancing shoes. The slippery soles in combination with the mirror-smooth floor made her look like a fawn on a frozen pond as her legs slid out from under her. Edward caught her and sat her back on the couch. He had forgotten to roughen up her soles, digging through the shoebox he found the little square of sandpaper and continued on to prepare her soles.

He selected a slow waltz on the stereo and led her, much more steadfast, to the middle of the room. Standing her away from him, he showed her the standard waltz box step. Exaggerating the lift to his toes over the second and third count.

"Now, I'm showing you the male pattern, your step should mirror mine. If I slide my right foot back, you have to slide your left forward. Then we both lift up while you bring your right foot next to your left with a graceful S movement on the floor. Finally, your left foot closes to your right while we slowly settle down on both whole feet. That's one-half of the waltz box step. Then, since you started moving forward, we need to turn the whole thing around and that means you start with your right foot moving back. The rest is the same. Ready? Let's try."

He stood arm's length away from her grabbing her right hand and positioning it to the side. He then placed her left hand on his shoulder, while his slid in place just over her left hip. After counting them down, Edward looked at the top of Bella's head, her hand gripped his hand and shoulder like a lifeline. The first half of the box went okay, it was a bit stiff but that was to be expected. When the second half started, her first move was okay but after that she got her feet mixed up and she ended up hanging off his arms with

her legs going their own way.

"Oh, shit, sorry, what the hell just happened?" She blurted out.

Once she was on her feet again, she looked with embarrassed eyes down at her wayward feet. His mind went into overdrive to find an explanation that would fit. He could only draw from his own experience and came up with the perfect thing for her. He could only hope she would be able to follow his reference.

"Well, I think your feet had a mind of their own, the only thing I can say is it's like a horse performing a flying lead change, if that's something you understand. I don't know how to explain it otherwise. It just has to click in your brain, let's try again."

They took their poses, this time, Bella tried to count with him, to feel the music. His horse reference had touched a nerve; she'd forgotten that the combination must feel the music riding a test. She closed her eyes and visualized the steps in her mind, just like she did when riding. That was all it took and before she knew it the song ended and Edward kissed her very excited.

"That was marvelous; it was as if you never did anything different. Now I want to try something! Keep the same mindset, but now try to follow my lead. You can't watch your feet the way we're going to stand now. Just keep your eyes on my face and feel where I steer you. We're going to dance a waltz routine, I'll keep it as simple as possible but there are going to be turns. Your steps won't change at all just where your feet have to go. If our connection is as I suspect it is, you're not going to have a problem."

"But, Edward, do you really think that'll work, I only just mastered that box step thing." She sighed. "I'm going to try this crazy one, because I trust you, don't bite my head off when it's a total bust, though."

Edward bounced to the stereo, he felt like a courter from the early nineteen hundreds, getting close to his ladylove the only way permitted in those days. He found another nice slow waltz and took the remote with him to start the music from their starting point. He repositioned Bella's hand on his shoulder showing its position, stepping closer he brought their bodies in contact and pushed his hand in her lower back, bringing her in a slight bend-back position. He knew that would make it easier to follow his lead and it was very close to the ballroom stance required in contests.

Since her feet were invisible to her, Bella looked at Edward's handsome features. His face was shining, he radiated happiness. He started the music and slid the remote in his pocket. He took her through the box step a few times over and it was as if they glided in place. Then they were off, he was elated, she reacted to his smallest indicators where to go. Turns weren't a problem at all.

Bella felt as if she was flying. Her movements became more certain, while Edward's stance came closer and closer to the perfect ballroom requirements. He brought up his left elbow and whispered to her to align her lower arm with his upper arm and rest her hand on his shoulder. Then try to keep her back arched so their upper bodies

weren't touching. His left hand slid up and came to rest on her shoulder blade, the control of her stance lessening, but the dance becoming much more enjoyable.

Both of the dancers had no idea that Kate stood on the other side of the glass door looking slack-jawed at the near perfect execution of the English waltz, but this was a winning performance at the amateur level. Technique aside, Edward hadn't ever danced that good, oh, he was perfect but he lacked emotion. But with this woman it looked like he lost his inhibitions, the physical shackles of his shyness were gone. From what she had seen of Bella, she understood enough that she too was most likely shy around people. The shell-shocked little bird she had left in the practice room turned into a Phoenix. Kate was sure Bella had not danced before today; her instinctual rightness in the movements was astounding.

The music stopped, Kate's jaw hit the floor and caught her bulging eyes when, after a gentlemanly nod, Edward grabbed Bella's face and proceeded to kiss her breathless. A glance at the clock told her to interfere; it was time to close the studio. She just wished Garrett were here instead of on the road with one of their aspiring championship couples. This dance held all the emotion he always insisted Edward had to search for. Garrett would be so happy.

She knocked on the glass door, breaking the couple apart. They jumped and both blushed, Kate was sad to see them stiffen, too.

"Now that was exactly how Garrett always told you to dance, Edward. For the first time, the emotions spat from the dance. Tell me what happened to make that change in you."

"Kate, keep out of this. What just happened was private, you can push all you want but I will never compete. However good you think I am."

"Oh, okay, then let's sit down and discuss what happened in the hall. I detest bullies and don't allow them their feast in humiliating anybody if I can turn the tables on them. I'm actually still seething over their heinous remarks."

Edward led Bella to the couch and they sat close together, legs in full contact and hands clasped. His eyes held questions. However, when he looked at her Bella sighed defeated.

"It's simple; I keep my enemies closer, preparing for their take down."

She pointed to her bag; Kate got it and gave it to her. After rummaging a little, she produced her digital recorder, now switched off because the objects of her recording weren't present.

"Alice and Rose are the daughters of the scheming buddies of my former guardian, now housekeeper with an employee to do her actual work. As far as I can see, Renee the said guardian, is lining up new people to scam out of money. The terror twins were shoved in my face, and I was told that they should be my friends because we were of the same social class.

"Nothing is further from the truth. I was raised by my father for sixteen years, he instilled a healthy work ethos and some humility.

Most of my real friends, like Jasper and Emmett from the vet clinic here in the building, are the same. Those skanks learned from their mothers that their father's money was the only thing they were good for. They act like spoiled princesses and I have to say, even though they're clients of mine, those men were walked all over and allowed it all to happen.

"I think Alice is mentally unstable, she tries to control everything with her rainbow obsession. Each day of the week has a color, and she tries very hard to get everything around her to confirm to her color of the day."

Bella brought out the skimpy, neon yellow pole dance outfit.

"It's Wednesday, that means yellow. The lack of coverage is Rose, who was a pretty girl but started plastic surgery on her eighteenth birthday. She's twenty-five now and has procedures done at least twice a year. If those two are small, she might add a third or even a fourth. Her brow is lifted; she has cheek implants, even though the lift already stretched her forehead. She has Botox injections every two months to keep it flat. As you saw, she has blown up her lips with collagen. Furthermore, she had her breasts and ass implanted. Her abs are implanted too after she had every ounce of fat liposuctioned. I'm not sure what else she has done, but they were talking about her nose for her next operation this morning.

"What I do is compile evidence for a possible court case against them. Ever since I started college, I was able to limit my exposure to two, partial days a week. Wednesday afternoons and Saturday nights. When you came in here, Edward, I was contemplating what I would do to rid myself of them completely, including Renee. Not just from my life, but theirs as well. Only destitution will keep them away.

"I've got nine years of tapes and memory cards in my safe. You might ask yourself why I kept them around that long. It's a good question. My father warned me about Renee. He also told me to keep her close until I was an adult and had access to the money right out. By keeping her close—and by extension the terrible twins—I also ensured that she couldn't victimize anybody else."

"That's very noble of you Bella, but I saw the tears in your eyes in the hall, they are hurting you and after nine years I'm afraid of what they might have accomplished in regards to your self-esteem."

Kate wrapped her arm around Bella's shoulders and shook a little. In answer, she got a delighted laugh.

"See, that's why my dad knew I could take it while the three of them would think they were succeeding in getting me down. If I get mad, my eyes start tearing. If I'm mad enough, my voice gives out and I can't say a thing. That's what you witnessed in the hall. I was so mad. Until now they never humiliated me in front of anybody, at least, the girls haven't. Renee is a whole other layer of evil. But as long as she tries to get at my money she avoids me, afraid I can see it on her face, at least, that's what she told her friends over the phone."

That made them all laugh, stereo tinkling from the women and deep

chuckles from Edward. Edward grabbed Bella's hands and drew her attention to him.

"Bella, I think we can safely say that you don't need to do anything alone again if you don't want to. Let me help you, together we can find a solution for first the yucky girls problem, then we'll tackle Renee, because I think she's the nastier problem."

"You might be right there, Edward, she's had free reign over my stipend as long as she kept me happy, and made sure I got everything my heart desired. I happen to know that my stipend was three times as much as what I needed. My dad wanted to make sure I could buy a new car when I needed it. That account is fairly empty now. I suspect that that money disappeared into Renee's pockets. She also had control over the ranch but I made sure that was protected. My neighbors know the horse business too. After Charlie's death, I asked them to be my financial caretakers. Carlisle has made sure that Renee wasn't able to ruin the ranch. She trê|"

"Wait a minute; did you just say your neighbors are the Cullens?" Edward broke into her tale.

"Well I said my neighbors and Carlisle, but yeah, the Cullens are my neighbors. What of it?"

Edward blushed a deep red and said, "The Cullens are my foster parents, it seems we've been neighbors for a long time."

"You're my mystery neighbor? Wow, talk about coincidence!"

"I've had enough, what is happening here. I've never seen Edward blush, even if he had to acknowledge the fact about who act as his parents. So, spill!" Kate said, exasperated.

Edward's face became petulant, it was clear he didn't want to divulge their budding love. His first reaction to anything big in his life was to protect it from the outside world.

Bella cupped his face and asked him why they couldn't tell such happy news, he didn't have an answer. He whispered to her that that was just who he was. She asked him if he felt ashamed of their connection. His eyes grew wide and he sat up straight, shaking his head so hard Bella almost got a headache from it. She laughed grabbing his face with two hands and planted a good one on his lips.

"That's what happening, Kate, we love each other and our shy boy wanted to protect it but didn't know this news should be shouted from the rooftops. We found our other half, and it's the best day of my life!"

Kate beamed at her, and kissed Edward's cheek. "Congratulations, let's start planning to make it better still!"

That's what they did for several hours.

3. The Plan

Dancing Queen

Chapter 3 The Plan

The alarm company called Kate's cell phone to ask if she intended to stay in the studio even longer, that's when they noticed the time. It was already half past six; half an hour past closing time for the studio, and the alarm company expected it to be set at ten past six at the latest. They wanted to know if everything was all right. Kate gave them the code and told them a meeting had run longer without them noticing. After ringing off, the three of them gathered their things and walked out together. Bella snorted.

"I forgot the skank squad brought me here, I have to call a cab."

Edward looked insulted but rallied fast.

"Oh no, you don't, why pay for a cab if I'm going the same way. Let me drive you, please?"

He gestured to a brand new Range Rover Evoque in forest green. Bella broke out in delighted giggles.

"Edward, you got the Evoque too. Looking at it, I believe the only difference is the color! Mine's dark blue."

Edward's eyes went wide but his smile was as broad as it could get. Bella noticed it was a bit crooked and she loved it.

"Bella, honey, I'd love to take you to dinner but Emmett and Jasper are probably already sitting on my porch for boys' night, they've done that since we met at college. They think they need to socialize with me, I think. Can I get a rain check?"

"Oh, I would've loved it too, if I hadn't had a phone date with my best friends. They kept me grounded through all the crap the color enhancement squad tried on me. Yes, a rain check it is. Now let's get home and be social, each in our own way."

With that, they were in the car. Kate was forgotten and stood next to her own car with a wistful smile. She wasn't accustomed to being treated as thin air, but she didn't mind. She reveled in the pure love that radiated off the young couple.

Edward opened his passenger side door and helped Bella into the car. He might be awkward at social occasions but he knew his manners. Besides, with Bella it just seemed second nature, he didn't have to think about it like he did in most situations. Bella was impressed, this was more like it, the dates she'd been on in the past didn't collect her at the door if they even collected her at all it was from a hostess station. Doors were her own task if the gits didn't want her to do it for them. Manners were scarce and she intended to keep hold of the man who said he was almost anti-social but turned out to be a spectacular Prince Charming.

Edward liked her demure ways, even more so now that he knew her so much better. He'd seen what a grounded, strong individual she was. Her humility, selflessness, and compassion made her that strong. After all she went through, she still placed herself in front of the hurricane to protect the people behind her. He was in awe of her

quiet strength and hoped it was contagious. From helping Carlisle with the computerization of the Cygnet Ranch's books, he knew she was a powerhouse businesswoman. Successful at the highest level of not just racehorses—which was hard enough to keep track of—she also elevated the top level of dressage horses, a horse trained by her could be at the World Championship the next day if the rider gelled with the horse easily. Yeah, he had found himself one hell of a woman.

He maneuvered the car from the parking place. Bella noticed the sign making it his spot. When they settled on the road, cruising in a comfortable silence, he gathered his thoughts and found his courage to tell her his life's story. Glad he had to keep his eyes on the road he started to speak.

"My biological parents weren't the sharpest tools in the box, probably not even in the house. Where my intelligence came from, I still don't know. My guess is that it ran in my mother's genes and it skipped her. I have only vague memories of my early years but everything comes into sharp focus the day I read the very first chapter of Harry Potter aloud. At just four years old. My parents became scared of me. They tried to make sure the smarts left me. They thought up elaborate schemes, I looked right through to the heart of the matter. I knew it was best to act dumb, but yeah, I was still only four years old and had no f-ing clue, pardon my French, how to hide my smarts, it wasn't an object, duh.

The day they got me out of there was salvation served on a slice of hell. My father asked me to do something heinous which I refused because I loved momma's dog."

Edward's voice took on the timbre of the small boy he once was.

"The result was simple; my mom slapped me for disobeying his order. Then my dad proceeded to give me the beating meant for the dog. Knowing my mother's parents now, I don't know what happened to her to make her that evil. I suspect a lot of it had to do with drugs. They weren't smart with their hits; they bruised me pretty much all over. Then they thought I might appreciate being treated like the dog I cared so much about and shoved me in the backyard with him. They left me there, all black and blue with a water bowl and another with dog food in it.

"That was their big mistake because our next door neighbor saw me laying there with the dog, shivering. She called the cops; they came and took me to the hospital and the dog to the ASPCA. My parents were treated to a one-way ticket to jail and then prison. I never saw them again.

"I was in the hospital for three weeks, mostly because they couldn't place me anywhere. That was until Carlisle and Esme registered to be foster parents. I was released to them, somehow I understood that they were people I could trust. They tested me and I broke the scale. Carlisle always treated me as an adult because my intelligence was that of one. Esme tried to insert some child into me, which was less of a success until she took me to the ASPCA to replace the dog I kept talking about."

Edward cleared his throat to dislodge the giant lump that had grown there when he talked about his early childhood; he felt he had lost

so much because of his parents. His gratitude to Esme and Carlisle was enormous and that choked him up too. Bella sat next to him, silent but for a few sniffles for what he went through. She felt that he didn't need her to acknowledge him through noise so she held his hand and every once in a while squeezed it for support.

"He was there still, Miko the husky, he was not ready to be adopted they said. He was very defensive and didn't let anybody near. That was until I saw him and without a care in the world walked into his cage. He licked my face and did his wiggly doggy dance. The people of the ASPCA said that it looked like he'd been waiting for me. We adopted him that day and he was with me until I went to college. He was ten when he died of old age.

My life became so much better the day I started to live at the Cullens. I even gained back family I never knew still lived. My mom's parents were, and still are, great friends of Carlisle and Esme. When they heard they were going to foster me, they immediately instated a trust fund for me and came to dinner. That was a big mistake because my mother was the spitting image of my grandmother. I hid, they searched the house for hours but I outsmarted them all by hiding on the roof. I know now that it was an irrational fear, but my four-year-old self only saw one of my tormentors in her. The fear was still fresh.

My grandmother forgave me, of course, and understood my fears. The second time they came to visit, Carlisle held me in his lap, so they could talk to me; to make me understand that lady wasn't my mother. Those betrayal issues are still part of me, that's what makes me shy, I simply had my trust broken by the one person that should always be there. That's why I'm telling you this while we're alone. Kate and Garrett, along with Emmett and Jasper only know the bare basics of the reason I'm a foster kid.

Anyhow, I was deemed too smart for the school system. Next to the IQ test, they also tested my entry level for public school. At age five, they found I was equivalent to a high school freshman, with some obvious gaps because I never had access to any schoolbooks before. Science didn't faze me at all; I saw the formulas and just understood how it worked. Carlisle and Esme sat me down and together we designed a curriculum for me to achieve a balanced education working a bit more on my weaknesses if you could call a B-plus level a weakness, and slowly advancing the strong points. It worked for me; I graduated high school summa cum laude at the ripe old age of ten."

"But, Edward, you said you had Miko till you went to college, and he was ten when he died, that makes you thirteen or fourteen when you started college."

Bella interjected his extraordinary tale, her man was a genius, he could easily rival Einstein, she thought, or more like DaVinci.

"You're right about that, the next four years my curriculum changed its focus. We again sat around the table and designed it more around healing and physical training. I had become a consummate nerd. My only focus was school. I had also become reclusive and was, luckily, smart enough to see it. I went into therapy and instead of books, I focussed on the horses around me. Just like with Miko, I had an instant connection with them. I loved riding and soon became

reasonably adept at helping them train the jumpers. The beginning steps the other riders didn't have the patience for anymore.

"Esme just wanted me to seek out one other sport I'd like to do. One night we were watching the Ballroom World Championships and I became fascinated. All those intricate steps executed flawlessly as a duo. That connection was what had me intrigued. Kate and Garrett won every stage of that championship; every dance was flawless and implemented in a way that almost made me cry. I knew they were from around here and I wrote them a letter to ask if they would teach me all they knew. Six weeks later, I started my first lesson in their old studio.

"I eventually started college at fourteen, doing two degrees in four years, back to back. Then I did their masters back to back too. I wanted to concentrate on one subject and not split my attention. My first master was computer sciences. I went to MIT for that, at least for my masters and doctorate. My initial studies I did completely online, Carlisle's rule, he knew I wasn't ready for the college scene at fourteen. Even at sixteen, he was reluctant to let me go, but MIT Sloan school of Business insisted I attended, they wanted not only to train the mind but your self-esteem and speaking in front of large audiences, anything needed to be a self-assured businessman.

At sixteen Carlisle didn't want me in the dorms, I got my driver's license the day after my birthday and I got myself a nice, second hand Volvo. High on safety ratings to keep Carlisle happy, and sleek enough to enjoy myself. He found two aspiring vet students under the stable hands on our ranch. Accidentally, they were also the only two persons I could relate to, a bit. He had several, high standing ranchers write recommendations for the North Grafton-based vet school for the two. That's how Emmett and Jasper became fixtures in my life. After some map gazing, we chose Farmingham as the place where we would live. Leaving them with a thirty-five-minute commute to North Grafton, and me a thirty-minute one to Cambridge.

"Carlisle bought us a great house in Farmingham, with five bedrooms and five bathrooms, a game room and a big kitchen. We would live as gods. It had a two-car garage, which was sacrificed to create a treatment room for the boys. I got the master suit and one of the smaller bedrooms to turn into a computer lab. We had the best time there, in a town where few students lived. Emmett and Jasper were my guides into adulthood. I was lucky enough to fill out around my seventeenth birthday, and I finally grew into my brain. It didn't endear me to people any more than before but at least, if they talked to me, it was as an adult. I wasn't talked down to anymore."

Bella grabbed his hand with both of hers; she was blown away by the agonizing hints hidden in his story. She was speechless. After all that she went through, she thought she knew agony. But reviewing her life she realized that the only truly agonizing situation was her father's murder, the rest were inconveniences at most. Her Edward had his eternal trust broken in the most heinous way. If she understood the hints in his story, that haunted him until the present day.

"I won't betray your trust, honey, but you know that Jasper and Emmett are my friends too. I need to know what to keep quiet about. Until then I'll act as if I know just that you're fostered, not when, why or how. I'll tell you how I met them. When they opened their clinic, I was able to at last dump the overpriced Newton

Veterinarians with their leering son who never achieved more than becoming a vet tech, because he'd rather run behind any ass he could chase, including mine. Although, that was the doing of the skanks once again. To find his one-night stands, Mike ranâ€"and probably still runsâ€" around in the same circles as they do. Anyway, I switched to two recently graduated vets from one of the best-rated vet schools around. The fact that they were friendly without leering made me very happy and they became my friends. I still can laugh myself silly that Emmett is the small animal specialist. They're true friends of yours, you know, they never even divulged your name, just that you were a friend from college with some money who helped them set up their practice."

Edward parked the car right in front of the ornate double doors giving entrance to Bella's mansion. She hadn't even noticed they turned into her driveway.

"Oh, we're here already. I don't know how to say this because I know you like to be a gentleman but please stay in the car. I don't want Renee to see you, yet."

She took out her phone and unlocked it, offering it to Edward.
"Please put in your number, I want to be able to get in touch."

He took the phone and started adding all his information into a new contact, his home phone number, his mobile number, his email and his Skype handle as well as his home address. He added a code for his alarm system too; an account he would have to create as soon as he was home. His keyless house opened with a six-digit code that disarmed the alarm and opened the doors. Her six-digit code was 467737 or horses in old-fashioned text language. It would be the first time he would give anybody a code. Until that moment, he wanted to be home when he let people enter his house. His porch was screened against insects and open to enter for guests who arrived if he wasn't home. Like Jasper and Emmett, because he was already late for their boy's night. He finished with setting the chorus of Shy Guy by Diana King as her ringtone for him. He gave her back her phone, which she promptly turned on him, taking his picture and added it to his contact info.

"Bella, can I see you tomorrow? It would be for dinner, I've got back-to-back meetings for my business during the day. You know, why don't I bring dinner to the stables, Renee wouldn't go there and I'd like to see your true home."

"If you don't mind eating in the haystack, picnic style, I wouldn't mind. One of my mares is almost ready to foal and I'm already sleeping in the stables right now. After my phone date with my besties and some dinner, it's where I'll be tonight too. You don't mind texting tonight, it's silent; Aurora, my mare, reacts strongly to noise, especially voices. In her heavily pregnant state, she's seeking reassurance but she needs her rest."

Listen to me, babbling away. Edward, before Renee sees us, I need to get inside. I'll text you tonight when I'm alone."

"Before I leave, my sweet girl, can I kiss you?"

Not giving him the chance to doubt her she dove over the console and gave him free access to her mouth, their tongues sliding against each

other, eliciting a feeling neither of them had ever felt. Edward's phone chimed in his pocket with a text message. It broke them apart and had them bursting into laughter. It seemed the magical air around them forged from their love, and simmering like an aged sauce in an Italian kitchen had plopped out of existence like a soap bubble touching a rough surface.

We'll talk she said, fiddling with her phone. From his pocket, his phone gave a generic ping, alerting him to a new text. He dug it out and looked at both messages. The first was from Emmett asking where he was and why he was late, he knew better than to blow off their boy's night. The second was from Bella returning the favor of exchanging numbers; he saved it as fast as he could, conscious of nosy friends and nasty elements. He saved her under his horse contacts. He wouldn't need a special category for her, she'd be between friends where she was and he'd create her a special place in his heart to keep her. If he could find his heart again after he gave it away so thoroughly in such a short time. He wasn't as brave as she was and didn't take her picture, even if he wanted to very much.

Bella opened the passenger side door with an adorable pout on her face, she, too, was reluctant to part ways for however short the period would be. She knew, however, that Renee would already be suspicious because of the prolonged time it had taken her to leave the car. The fact that she arrived home in a strange car was reason enough to be suspicious enough; Renee knew this was the skanks' afternoon. So, with a heavy heart, she said a whispered goodbye and exited the car. Walking slowly up to the front doors, she reached them and turned and waved when Edward restarted the car and drove off slowly, his gaze locked on the rearview mirror more than on the road before him.

Bella gathered herself and summoned the joy she held over finding the other half of her soul before she entered the foyer of her house. She startled Renee who was just putting on her coat, dressed to the nines and wafting enormous amounts of expensive perfume; so much so that it made Bella sneeze. Renee couldn't look her in her eyes, confirming her suspicions that Renee had once again plundered her savings account coupled with her former trust account. That was, after all, the only account she ever gained access to. Now that Bella no longer used it for her needs, Renee thought it fair game to ransack the rest of the money it contained.

Bella appraised Renee's clothes, with an expert eye. Even if Alice only ever took her to teen high-end stores "Alice was too short to fit into adult clothes" Bella knew designer when she saw it. The only reason Renee still lived in the mansion was the fact that she had to take the job as housekeeper that Bella had offered her. She hadn't saved a dime in her life. To spend money "other people's money preferably" was her sole care in the world... Bella made sure to remind her.

"Hi, Renee, did you get your work done today? The laundry, the carpets vacuumed? Is dinner ready? No? Okay, ignore your assigned tasks; see how long I keep a deadbeat employee on my payroll. I kept you on out of the kindness of my heart; don't make me throw you out!

Now, it looks like you're going out to air some of that stench. It

doesn't flatter an employee to stink up the house, you know. Take the crap with you and apply it after arrival the next time. It's time for me to start to expect the best of the best from the people who work for me, and frankly your work ethic and manners leave much room for improvement. This is your first official warning, clean up your act or take your leave from this house before I fire you! Goodnight."

The whole speech was delivered in a bright voice hinting at the confidence behind it. Renee scurried out of the front door to a car that had just arrived. Behind the wheel sat Jacob Black, a well-known playboy in the area.

"Oh, and Renee," Bella called after her from the doorstep, "next time please make your dates collect you at the service entrance. You're not part of the family, so you can't act like that either. If I see this again, it'll be your second warning. Don't think you're entitled, not even after twenty-five years. Toodles."

Renee stood rooted to the spot, mouth agape, rage pumping through her body while she stared at the closed doors. Bella, in the meantime, skipped to the kitchen, dug around the fridge, then the freezer until she found something to celebrate her new outlook on life. Before she would call her friends she would eat something mouthwatering made by the cook. She found a delicious stew and threw it in the oven. She ran to her suite and freshened up, changing her clothes to a comfortable pair of yoga pants and a T-shirt. The timer on the oven went off just as she stepped into the kitchen again, barefoot. She sat down after putting the stew in a bowl and grabbing a piece of bread. After a few bites, she bounded up again going to the wine fridge and grabbing a nice merlot and a glass. A rummage through a drawer produced a corkscrew. From the counter she took the remote for her in-home sound system, selecting a pleasant, all music, easy listening radio station. She made herself a spot at the table and dug into her food, all the while thinking about her new life.

4. Their Real Friends

Dancing Queen a Twilight FanFiction by Pienuniek.

Chapter 4 Their Real Friends

The fifteen-minute drive from Bella's front door to his driveway gave Edward time to compose himself, after the great revelation that love existed for him. After his emotional outpouring of his life's story, what was left was the feeling that a load had been lifted from his shoulders and pure elation remained. His face arranged itself in the biggest grin that he couldn't, and wouldn't wipe off. Even the trepidation about having to explain himself to his friends seemed insignificant.

Emmett and Jasper had arrived at Edward's cabin and were stunned to find the place deserted.

"Well, this is new. He's never late, Mr. I like punctuality, must have had a busy day at the studio." Jasper said, he'd come straight from one of the ranches. After he had treated the colicky horse on the Cullen Ranch, he'd been called out to a cattle ranch where he had to clean up a botched rubber band castration on a pet goat. He was

exhausted and settled himself on the porch in one of the Adirondack chairs. He was glad Edward had provided comfortable chairs.

Emmett, however, paced like a caged bull, his impatience emanating from every movement. He kicked little rocks into the grass along the driveway.

"You'd say so, but they had very little traffic this afternoon. After those two fashion victims had been thrown out by Kate, I didn't see any more clients. I could have missed some because Mrs. Robinson came by with her litter of Chihuahuas. Poor Tsiboo did have her pups, all nine of them, I keep being awed by how so many pups fit into such a small dog. But to get back on topic, I don't think he was swamped. However, he did arrive with his laptops so he might have gotten bogged down in trouble shooting his latest fabulous piece of programming. It would be nice if he looked at a woman like he looks at his computers every once in a while."

He discovered a fairly round rock, which he started to use as a soccer ball kicking it with one foot and stopping it again with the other. Jasper looked at his juvenile actions with a lazy smile; Em was ridiculous, always trying to match up Edward with all his rejects.

"Oh, Em, please stop trying to match him, how many blind dates did you set up that he simply never showed up for. He warned you several times that a drink with the boys was just that, and if he saw a girl not attached to your lips on such a night he'd turn around and go home, and he did. Just acknowledge that he's smarter than any of us and let him live his own life." Jasper said, exasperated, "Oh, did you know those fashion victims you said were thrown out this afternoon had their claws in Bella Swan when I ran out for the Cullen horse?"

Jasper now sat on the rim of the chair, elbows on his knees. Emmett's face lit up,

"You mean there's a possibility that Swanny met Wardo?"

From behind the cabin, they could hear a horse neighing; it made Emmett break out into a gallop up and down the driveway.

"Yes," Jasper said, "but she didn't look like we meet her on the ranch, she was clearly out of her comfort zone. I didn't talk because the small one was all over me. As if I was her long lost other half or something. I was never so glad I had to run out for the emergency. She wore bright yellow for God's sake."

"Well, Plastic Fantastic went ass over tits when her heel broke on the retreat, man that was a sight!"

Emmett chuckled a bit at the remembered mishap in front of the building. He went to the back of his Jeep and grabbed a six-pack of beer from behind the driver's seat. He gave one to Jasper, who had propped open the porch door; the only thing not alarmed on Edward's house. Emmett opened his can and took a long drink, wiped his face with the back of his hand and belched. With a look at the still empty driveway, he sighed.

"Where is Wardo? He really is late. I'll text him and then order

pizza, I'm starving. If they come before he's here, the more there is for us."

Emmett took out his phone and sent Edward a very crass text to hurry up and that he wouldn't like it if he stood up his boys. He expected an immediate answer since Edward had speech-to-text on his phone to text while driving. But he was disappointed; he got no reaction what so ever. He became a bit concerned because this really was not Edward's style; over an hour late and no answer. The concern was pushed aside for him to order three big pizzas with their favorite pizza parlor. After nine years he was well versed in his dinner partners likes and dislikes. He couldn't understand, besides allergies, why people wouldn't eat everything available. His nickname on campus had been the Garbage Disposal. Edward didn't do nicknames since his parents had had too many derogatory ones.

Jasper still sat hunched over his knees, phone in hand, playing Angry Birds; he was a moron at that game, but it was so damn addictive. It left his brain free to dissect the fact that his best friend was over an hour late, without even a peep. His mind went there, the place he really didn't want to be, the mangled car, the bloody windscreen and the tipped over cattle truck that had been empty, thank the powers that be. If they had been trapped beneath a herd of trapped beef, he wouldn't have had anything left to bury of his parents. It had also been the reason he and Edward had gone to college somewhat together. Carlisle had been his father's best friend, making the man feel responsible for keeping his friend's only son on the path he'd chosen.

Emmett, on the other hand, had put up a request for roommates on Craigslist, stating that he knew he'd be too distracted by the hustle and bustle in the dorms to study. He wanted two serious roommates with whom to rent a house. He preferred other veterinarian students, but wasn't picky if other science students applied. The after school job both he and Jasper had at the Cullen Ranch showed the three of them fit together. Emmett providing the light touch both Edward and Jasper lacked due to their distant and recent pasts, respectively. The distance between campus and their house was perfect for Emmett, he still stayed in the dorms as a guest on occasion, because he couldn't ignore the distractions all of the time. Jasper kept him in line, dragging him to his car and telling him to get his head out of his ass and dedicate himself. Emmett did the same for Jasper when he began to slip into morose thoughts.

"Hey Jazz, I've got a funny feeling about this. I can be a big moron a lot of the time, I know, but this really isn't Edward's style. Where is he?"

Jasper threw another look at the driveway, and a smile crept up his face. In the distance, he saw a dust cloud too big for one car. Dinner and their missing friend would arrive simultaneously. Both were just in time to brighten his mood and prevent Emmett from going into a bad place too. It didn't happen often, but they were legendary among the friends.

"What are you smiling about; he could lie crumpled in a ditchâ€¦ Shit sorry, shouldn't have said that. What are you pointing at?"

Emmett turned around just as the sound of two cars reached them. When he saw them, his smile couldn't be held back, his mind going over

everything he could tease Edward with. The prodigal friend parked his car and jumped out, the biggest smile on his face.

Bella cleared the table, took her glass and the rest of the bottle of wine to her personal chambers. Her soundproofed quarters that had enough locks to mirror the front door of the mansion, with a separate alarm system. It always had baffled Bella that the fact she bolted herself in her quarters had never raised Renee's suspicions as to her intentions. Her quarters were her sanctuary, the place she could be herself, without interruptions from any irritant. It was also the only place she dared contact her best friends, the twins Tanya and Irina, who went to high school with her. When she went to the local college, they searched the country for any course that would further their education in dog training. To have enough methods to tackle any dog they'd encounter. They had just moved from LA to Texas after a long internship with _Cesar Millan_, the _Dog Whisperer_. In Texas, they'd found a course where human and animal psychology were combined. Wednesday evenings were their time to call each other; the girls knew Bella needed support after spending the afternoon with the disparaging twosome.

"_Twin casa, how may we help you?" _

"Girls, I've had the most mind-blowing afternoon."

"_Wait what did you say?"_ Tanya almost shouted as Irina went on in the typical twin way. _"That doesn't sound like the terror twats were around."_

"No, they weren't, well they started out being there. I texted you what they deigned my birthday present to be. Well, today it was time for the first lesson. Would you believe they wanted to watch?"

She didn't give her friends time to react, and their gasped _no's_ were blanketed by her enthusiastic recounting of the story of her afternoon.

"_and because the color coordinated chicks had left me hanging he drove me home, telling me his history." She finished.

Tanya couldn't hold back any longer, _"Bella, you can't be serious, think girl, there's no such thing as love at first sight! This charlatan must have researched you and knew how to take advantage. He's after your money, lady."_

"_Have you Googled him?"_ Irina added.

"You both know I didn't, I don't even have a computer here."

"_Come on, work with us, you've got a smartphone; we gave it to you. Just check him out."_

Bella felt bad that their outbursts made sense. She now felt as if she'd been dumb, been used. Just like the anti-friends had done. She even could imagine that they hired the people at the dance studio to trap her. After all, she wasn't interesting; just the single-minded, plain, fat girl next door that accidentally had money like water. She suddenly felt helpless and alone, not even her best friends were in her corner, and that sparked her ire, lighting the fire of her anger.

"Now listen here, because you two are so jaded that you can't believe my story, you don't have to bring me down from my high! If you can't be respectful of what I tell you as the truth, I don't need your support. I told you about the instant connection we had. For the first ten minutes, we didn't even say a word; we were lost in each other's eyes. Ever experienced something like that? The feeling like you're finally complete? I don't think so! So, if you have nothing supportive to say or do then I need to hang up."

She was gesturing wildly with her free hand, her anger a tool to cover up her insecurities. Her inner fight was once again leaning toward Edward. Each and every argument her mind threw up, her heart told her to ignore, with strong counter-arguments that crumbled everything her mind could conjure up. The fact that her mind had held on to so many taunts from the atrocious threesome only made her angrier.

"_Bella! Be reasonable, you need to protect yourself against gold diggers!"_ Tanya threw back. Irina kept silent; she heard something in Bella's voice that had never been there before. To her, it sounded like her friend was happy.

"Gold diggers, really, Tanya! It isn't as if he's poor, he recently bought the exact same car I did. That's not a cheap one or a car an imposter can afford. Plus, you haven't looked in both Kate's and Edward's eyes. They were horrified about my tale of the wannabe Mrs. Swan and her friends' daughters."

Bella knew to hold her secrets close when it came to the twins, not that they would betray her but they often discussed very personal information in public places; their voices shrill and loud, all in all, a recipe for disaster.

"_Tan, shut up,"_ Irina forestalled a further rant by her sister. "_Listen, not to her words but how she sounds. Even now, when she's steaming mad at you, there is an undertone of happiness. When have you ever heard that since her father was taken? We might be skeptics, but I think that for her, it's true; what kind of friends ignores that?"_

Bella could hear Tanya's pout through the phone, she knew that girl liked her drama but at that moment, she was glad Irina gagged her.

"_The ones she's had to deal with today and because of those friends she has to call us to unwind. Sorry Bella, what my sister said is true, you sound happy. Is he handsome?"_

"Tanya, I mean this from the bottom of my heart. Don't patronize me and think you'll get away with stomping on my feelings that way ever again. You won't get me to doubt what I felt and saw, what he felt in his eyes. Until you truly know what love is, don't pass judgment on what's possible.

"Because I lost so much I held everybody at arm's length, especially men. The original skanks set me up with all kind of, so-called, high society guys. Now that I think of it, they must have run out of potentials, they haven't set me up in months. Or maybe the male population wised up and stopped dating them other than for a quick

fuck.

"They saddled me with the ones that started to get clingy; their rejects were my dating pool. Well, the dates were nice if the guys weren't totally self-absorbed. I believe I told you both that I once snored myself awake, and the ass hadn't even noticed I dozed off. He went on to tell me more about his accountant's practice and some of his tax evasion tactics. Even I knew were just little loopholes they left to placate inventive accountants. Then he went on that he was the main chair on the biggest account in his firm. I forgot the name now, but it was in the paper a few weeks later. His big clients were indicted for money laundering and big time tax evasion. I still believe his bosses set him on the case as a scapegoat.

"What I'm trying to say is that by working with animals all my life I learned to trust my gut feelings and I know I've found my destiny. And yes, he's gorgeous, too."

"_Good,"_ Irina said, "_let's plan the demise of the terror twins. You need to begin to destroy them. This has gone on long enough. You damn well placated them for nine years of your life! Now that you have a man, finally, I might add, you're going to stand up to them, aren't you?"_

"Well, yes, of course, I mean if this had happened before my birthday I might have waited. Now, it's go ahead all the way. However, those skanks will be second to my total destruction of Renee. I have to be glad my dad at least lived until I was sixteen. I don't think I'd have stood a chance if I'd been younger, really."

"_Isn't that the truth,"_ Tanya said. "_But let's brainstorm ideas. I mean three brains as smart as ours can do more than you can alone."_

That statement started an hour and a half of every kind of idea. From harebrained to brilliant and from dead-simple to insanely intricate. At last, Bella ended the call with the promise to keep the girls apprised of the situation.

A look at her security cameras showed that Renee still hadn't returned. With a smile on her face, Bella texted Edward to tell him she loved him, and that she would retire to the stables for the night. Somewhere in the back of her head, she hoped he would show up. She was sure he would come with Jasper if Aurora would be in labor. Her mind on her high-strung mare she almost collided with the pimpmobile of Jacob Black screeching into her drive at high speed, fishtailing to remain on the road. In her rearview mirror, she saw him open the passenger side door and shove something limp from the cab, only to drive straight on, having the speed close his door, before he raced past her on the one lane drive, gravel spitting out from under his tires.

Edward paid the pizza delivery guy once he arrived at his house. Jasper was looking at him with a curious expression on his face while Emmett was already busy opening the boxes and collecting slices on one of the lids he'd torn off.

"What?" Edward said to Jasper when the delivery guy was tracking back the way he came. "Am I wearing something of yours?"

"Well, I'd say you're wearing something unusual for you, for sure. I mean, as long as I've known you I've never seen you glow like that."

"Maybe he's pregnant," Emmett offered through a mouthful of pizza, before taking a long drink from his beer.

At the incredulous stares from his friends he back peddled and mumbled around yet more pizza, "well, you said he was glowing. The genius could have come up with a way."

"Why would I want to be pregnant, Emmett? Oh, forget it. It's nothing of the sort. I've met my soul mate today. Maybe the glow is just there because I'm happy for the first time in my life!"

"So, with the way you look I'd say you already got laid," Emmett stated.

"Moron!" Jasper said, elbowing him in his ribs, hard.

"What do you mean Emmett, that 'getting laid' is all there is possible between a man and a woman? Huh, well? Silence, how typically you. Asshole. You know what? Give me that pizza and bugged off; you're not welcome here anymore. After all this time, I'm fed up with the endless teasing and badgering for me to 'get some'. You know, life is far more than 'getting laid.'"

"Get real, Edward. There's nothing more between a man and a woman than sex. Love is highly overrated. The only thing that happens when you get attached that much is you get hurt." Emmett blurted before Jasper could stop him.

"So, is that really where you stand, Emmett? Because I tend to agree with Edward on this one. He might be a recluse, most of the time, but he clearly has his priorities in a much straighter line than you do.

"But, Edward, having said that, do you know enough about this girl? She might have targeted you. You're not exactly poor, you know..."

Edward snorted when that argument was posed. He really didn't want to reveal Bella to these apes without talking to her. He also knew she'd be talking on the phone and couldn't respond to texts. Putting one and one together, he told them a little more.

"Well, I know her as well as she trusted me. I've known of her ever since I came to live here. We're the same age, and we're both independently wealthy. She doesn't need my money! And get those pouts off your faces, I won't tell you two who it is. As long as the respect you have for me and my loved ones is as thin as you showed me just now, I'll happily keep it to myself."

The puppy dogfaces on both vets remained, maybe the cause of them changed because they finally understood how serious Edward really was.

Edward, in the meanwhile, grabbed a few slices of pizza and a beer, keyed in his entrance code and entered his residence. He slammed the door closed behind him, left the food on the kitchen counter and

proceeded through the back door to his stable and kennel behind the house. His rust and white Husky greeted him with enthusiasm. He had ample space to run and play, but he loved his human dearly. An emotion Edward readily returned. Rusty was, after all, a descendant of Miko. Rusty was just as loyal and sweet as Miko had been. The dog was whining, barking and jumping around until Edward opened the kennel and held up his right hand in a stop gesture. Rusty immediately plopped on his haunches and looked up expectantly, head held a little askew.

"You know, Rusty, I've found myself a mate. Really, we just fit together. I've never felt anything like it. She's going to be your friend, too. I'll ask her if you can come tomorrow."

Rusty, sat patiently next to him. He nudged his nose under Edward's hand, trying to make him pet him. His tail sweeping the floor behind him sparkling clean.

"Yeah, I know, do you want your dinner?" Edward continued. The word dinner made his tail sweep even harder, accompanied by an almighty whine that ended in a deep woof. Rusty most definitely wanted dinner. It was already late.

"You're getting a treat, we have to celebrate!" Edward said while he stood and walked into the tack room annex feed storage. A look on the shelf decided that Rusty could and would get his favourite wet food. A big treat on a weekday for sure.

Turning to the other side of the feed closet Edward got Midnight's food bucket and grabbed a few treats from the big stash he had laying around. He walked out of the tack room, hands full with a bowl of wet food and the bucket of oats and the special active horse feed he ordered through Carlisle. Rusty still sat exactly where he left him, the excited energy made him shake in place. He knew better than to crowd his feed station, even if he smelled the best dinner ever.

Edward put his bowl down at the station, emptied, and refilled his water bowl before making the hand gesture to allow the softly whining dog to approach. Rusty walked up to the food and sat again looking up at Edward.

"Okay, boy, have a nice dinner," Edward said and Rusty attacked the bowl with gusto.

Entering the pasture available to both his animals Edward looked out to the tree line. His horse was barely visible against the dark trees in the twilight until the clouds broke and the sun lit up the pasture with an orange glow.

The majestic horse stood proud against the darkened backdrop. His shiny black coat bearing the signs of a day's play with Rusty. Edward was glad he'd braided the long manes to keep them from tangling. He whistled and Midnight's head shot up. He came to Edward with his head held high, a game he always played. With his height being equal to Edward's at eighteen hands, if he held his head high his owner couldn't reach his halter.

"Well, aren't we cocky again this evening. I'm really curious how you're going to react to my new friend," Edward whispered. He'd long

since learned that Midnight, a thoroughbred Frisian stallion, was a cheeky one. His solution was to be smarter than the horse. From Midnight's halter hung a length of rope that wouldn't interfere with the horse's motions, but gave him the reach he needed to grab it. The whispering, too, had the desired effect to make Midnight curious enough to lower his head.

"There you are, I really hope you'll be more accepting than my human friends. This woman is going to be in our future forever, I'm sure of it."

Edward grabbed the bucket and held it in front of Midnight's nose. With an appreciative whinny he dove in and started munching away at his evening meal while allowing Edward to stroke his head and neck. Even butting his head against Edward's shoulder a few times to make him continue. While he was cheeky, overall he was an affectionate horse.

"Hey, Edward."

The peaceful celebratory bubble Edward had immersed himself in with his animals was rudely popped by unwanted guests calling out to him. Midnight whiney-snorted his displeasure when through the startled motion of Edward's arm, the bucket collided with his sensitive nose. He, of course, sensed the tension seeping into Edward's body when the voices from the fence kept calling.

"Yo, man, were right here. Come on! Don't do your hermit routine. It's still boys' night, you know," Emmett whined. His childish act illustrated his total lack of empathy. He didn't like it at all that Edward had dismissed him so easily.

Even if Emmett was clueless, Jasper was not. He saw the way the man and horse in the distance reacted, and it made him try, unsuccessfully, to tow Emmett back to the front of the house. He felt guilty that he brought up reservations about the first woman he'd ever seen Edward head over heels about. He also knew a thing or two about abuse; he knew the gnarly scars hidden deep in Edward's mind all too well himself. He could beat himself at that moment. It was his gold digger remark that sent Edward over the edge and to the sanctuary of his non-judgmental animals.

Oblivious, Emmett kept goading Edward, "Hey, Wardo, I can give you some phone numbers, now that you're finally interested."

"God damn, Emmett, shut the hell up! Can't you see he's shutting down? Why can you never respect a man for who he is? Why do you always want to make a joke out of everything? Respect him as he is, for that matter respect me for who I am! Right now, you ruined boys' night, get going. Go to one of your sluts, maybe you can find one of the sunshine girls that bullied Bella this afternoon. You'd fit perfectly with them!" Jasper spat at Emmett.

Edward turned his back roughly on the squabbling twosome. He didn't want to give away the big smile on his face after just hearing Bella's name being mentioned. Midnight bumped his large head against Edward's chest, his food bucket was empty. Edward answered this request for attention with a vigorous two-handed rub behind his ears. The sensitive nose of Midnight picked up something he liked very much, and he started trying to get to the treats in Edward's

pocket.

"Hey, hey, you vandal, you know they're yours but if you chew my jacket to bits they're the last you'll ever get," Edward reprimanded while digging the treats from his pocket. Midnight snorted and pushed against Edward's chest again.

Emmett, in the meanwhile, had retreated to his truck. For the first time not only had Edward shrugged and sent him off but Jasper too. He sat in the cab staring morosely at the scene before him. Rusty ran back and forth behind the fence, barking at Jasper, who sat motionless staring at Edward and Midnight. Emmett wondered if it was really him that ruined the evening. He went over everything that was said and recognized that his remarks were insensitive, and to be honest, they were on a level he didn't even like. When had that happened? When had he crossed that line?

Jasper had given up, Rusty made it perfectly clear. It wasn't a happy 'you're there' bark, he was defending his territory. At that moment, he seriously doubted his friendship with Emmett. He knew Edward would never kick them out of the practice, but he, himself, had spoken without knowledge and insulted Edward badly. Emmett had been way worse, but that crass exterior was part of the deal with the gentle giant. It just looked as if he had lost every sense of boundary that night. After he was dismissed, he only went further than ever riling up Edward. They should both have been more supportive of their shy friend. It was too easy to forget that the man was thrice as smart as both of them together.

Jasper slowly stood to keep Rusty from flying into the electrified fence. He backed away, looking at the ground, showing submission to the dog. When he was far enough, Rusty gave one last "boof" and ran back to Edward. Jasper looked with admiration at how Edward calmed the excited dog with a gesture while feeding his horse a treat with the other hand. Only when the dog was calm did he get a pat on the head.

When Edward's phone signaled a text, the single tone echoed around the yard. He read it at once, and the message made up his mind to cut the standoff short.

*I'm at the stable, text first if you want to call. B

Edward led Midnight into his stall and made sure he had enough straw on the floor and hay in the manger. His water supply was automatic, but he checked to make sure it worked and that the bowl was clean. Rusty ran around the barn three times before he too settled on his bed inside his cage. His water was also checked and refreshed. Both animals received some more loving before Edward retreated to the window seat in his bedroom with a nice glass of scotch and a plate of cheese, crackers and some fruit.

He looked out the window and saw the lights on in the barn next to the dark rectangle he knew was the dressage ring of the neighboring ranch. That ring held a special place in his heart. Until today, the only girl he was ever interested in rode her horses there. She was his dream girl from the first time he saw her ride, years ago. He banished the thoughts planted in his head by the boys and conjured his mental library of his dream girl. At once, he felt guilty for thinking of another girl other than his Bella when it clicked. His

dream girl and his Bella were one and the same! That had to be it. Every time he looked at her from the window, he had felt an inexplicable draw to the girl on the horses so far away. He had shaken it off as a crush like the boys had described to him. His therapist had even agreed. Now he knew that it had been so much more than a simple crush. His heart had recognized its mate.

He just had to tell her.

He dug out his phone and texted Bella to see if he could call.

5. Chapter 5

Dancing Queen a Twilight Fanfiction by Pienuniek

Chapter 5

Bella had arrived at the stables and checked all the horses, doling out half apples left and right. Her trek around ended at the stall of her beloved mare, Aurora, a heavily pregnant Appaloosa eight years old. This was going to be her second foal. Bella had decided against putting her out on the professional dressage circuit, even though her pedigree was stellar and she was just as good as most of the champions. Her high-strung nature made it highly unlikely that an audience-filled arena would have her perform well. Her first foal did, his sire was also the sire of Gestion Bonfire, the Oldenburger, who was part of the Olympic Champion pair in 2000. Cygnet Astor was sold to the same stable his brother had trained.

This foal was a shot in the dark; Bella used her own stallion, Twilight. He was very calm for a stallion, and showed a remarkable talent for dressage, even if he was bred to be a jumper. Twilight had been bought from Bella's neighbors when his jumping talent lacked, but his paces showed his talent lay more toward dressage. Bella had trained him herself and although a hand full, with his stallion attitude, he did well.

Aurora was in the isolated maternity stable, with softer lighting and a thick layer of wood shavings under a just-as-thick layer of straw. The stall was double size; Bella had made a bed of hay bales and blankets in one corner without crowding the antsy horse. Any other night she would have switched her phone off, but tonight it was inside her bra on silent. She wanted to be sure she would feel the vibrations if Edward texted.

Aurora greeted her with a soft whiny and a scrape of her hoof as she accepted her apple. The stable boys had fed and watered all the horses before retiring. One of them watched over them via a closed circuit camera system Bella had installed after her father had been killed. The images were also monitored by a separate security firm; in case, the stable boy watching fell asleep or was part of the gang of thieves.

Bella knew that labor wouldn't happen that night, Aurora would never have accepted the apple if she felt off. The horse still stayed calmer with Bella present, that's why she was sleeping in the stall with her. Her secondary reason was the fact that she was sure that none of her tormentors would even dare to come within a hundred feet of anything that resembled a horse. Once one of the miniature horses

had had a split hoof, and she took him to the house and tethered him on the soft grass of her lawn. Renee had driven her car to the back of the house and used the staff entrance to go inside. She even refused to open the front door for visitors. The terror twins were conspicuously absent for the entire two weeks he traipsed around on his bandaged hoof—that might have been why Bella put him there in the first place.

Bella smiled at those memories swirling around in her head. She had used a whole lot of subtle means to keep the wannabes at bay while keeping them busy and close so they couldn't victimize others. She'd done a great job with Renee, who was quickly coming up to her sell-by date. The color-coordinated cowards did enough themselves to ruin their chances for continued acceptance in the real world. The world they created with their fathers' money was teetering on its stiletto heels. One crack in the road and it would fall flat on its face, not catching itself because it just had its nails done. After all, what was a third nose job when the first two were ruined by the pavement against perfectly manicured nails.

Bella knew she took her brain on a walk through a forest of interesting analogies, but oftentimes, that gave her the courage to endure their insane insults. She shrugged and settled with her back against the wall on her hay bales. Another smile settled on her face when she felt a divot on the side of the bales. It seemed that Aurora had snacked on her bed today. From the bag she kept on the wall-side of the bed, she took the book on horse genealogy to brush up on techniques. She needed a pure blood Frisian to stud for her Clydesdale mare, Sara. Originally a rescue horse that couldn't be placed, she possessed a lot of potential without the pedigree. The number tattooed inside her top lip only told them that she was a pureblood; it had been a botched job so Jasper could see that it was there, but he couldn't make out the numbers. Bella thought that the natural talent of the Clydesdale, mixed with the Frisian's greater grace would make for an imposing dressage horse.

Bella was deep into recessive traits and how to bring them out, when her left boob suddenly was tickled by her vibrating phone. She read the text and smiled, all while slowly standing up and leaving the stall as quietly as possible. Aurora looked her way but kept her resting pose, only switching from her left to her right front leg. Walking out of the stables, Bella composed a text that wouldn't sound too eager. Oh, who was she kidding, of course, she was eager. After she had sent her enthusiastic: `_yes, please :):_`, she wandered into the dressage ring and found the chair that sat in the middle. Before she reached her seat, her phone began an insistent vibrating in her hands. The screen lit up with the most beautiful face she'd ever seen.

"Edward, hi."

"_Hi, love. I've got to tell you something."_

Bella's stomach filled with butterflies from the velvety voice in her ear. His tone, however, also sparked a lot of nerves that weren't as nice. Did he realize she wasn't worth his effort already?

"Oh?" Was all she could get out.

"_Yeah, I meant to tell you this earlier, but we didn't have the

time."_

What was this? Was he married after all? Did he have a kid somewhere he abandoned? Bella's butterflies had grown armor and were attacking the lining of her stomach and making her feel decidedly nauseous. She fell down on the chair backward supporting her slumping form with the backrest. She forced herself to make a sound. "Hmmm."

"_Yeah, stupid boys' night, but what I was saying is that ever since I moved into my house, I've had a crush on a beautiful girl from afar. She's my dream girl."_

And there it was, Bella always knew it was too good to be true. Tanya was right, they fell in lust, not love. How would she survive this blow to her ego? She shrugged; she'd known she was unremarkable to see. She wasn't model material and was told so every single day since her dad died. She didn't understand Edward's happy tone right at that moment. Did the thought of that dream girl make him that happy? Then why was he calling her?

"I see."

"_Yup, I can see her from the window seat in my bedroom. I've spent many days looking at her work her horses."_

Bella didn't know which way his bedroom window faced. It was clear from this dream girl that it wasn't her way. It hurt that one of her neighbors was what he wanted over her plain ass, even if it was from afar. She lost the battle with her tear ducts and tears trickled down her face. Roughly scrubbing at them to keep her composure, she readied herself to say goodbye to a dream.

"_I'm sitting in my window seat now, and I just think my dream girl is sitting on a chair in the middle of her dressage ring."_

Wait! What? Nobody but her would be at the stables at one am. Moreover, there was no way somebody else sat on a chair in a dressage ring at that time. The ass had cut her down to the quick to tell her that she was his dream girl.

"Edward! You ass, why didn't you say it that way!" She sniffled. Patting her pockets for a tissue but not finding one. She snorted to prevent becoming a mess.

"_Honey, what's wrong? Are you crying? What did I do? I felt guilty because I thought about my dream girl when I sat down here and realized that you two are one and the same. Oh please, love, don't cry. I was honest, I told you the moment I realized it."_

"Oh, you adorable man," Bella sighed. Wiping her nose on her sleeve. "You had me convinced you had reconsidered our bond after a good talk with your friends."

Edward leaned back heavily, his head hit the wall with a thud. His free hand disappeared into his hair. Of course, he had upset her, his mind went over his confession at lightning speed. He never said it was a good thing, until the last sentence. His leg that was on the ground started to dance with nerves. Using his brain at top speed, he thought ahead, and all the possibilities flew before his mind's eye.

"This won't do, hold on, honey, I'm on my way. Love you!" he hurriedly said and disconnected the call unceremoniously, already halfway down the stairs.

In two seconds flat, he made it to the tack room quickly grabbing Midnight's bridle and his helmet. Driving around in his car would take too long. He had to be near Bella as soon as possible. He had to make it better face to face. Rusty sat up in his bench and clawed at the door.

"No, she has high strung horses. Not yet, boy." He calmed down the dog. If Midnight was surprised, he sensed the urgency in his human and didn't pull the regular tricks he normally played when he was tacked. Edward threw open the doors and flipped the switch, lighting up his paddock. Using the manes as well as the reins he hoisted himself on his horse. Midnight shook his head violently when Edward was seated. He didn't get the time to show some attitude, though, because Edward kicked him into a gallop straight away. Elated, the horse jumped into high gear going straight for the back of the paddock, the only area not surrounded by the high electric fence. He could gallop in a straight line to the lights of Bella's stable. His paddock fence was regular, ranch style slatted, only on the back side of the property, where there was no electrified fence. He'd made it Rusty proof with chicken wire on the outside, dug into the ground a good two feet. The white fence shone brightly in the floodlights and Midnight felt Edward didn't want him to stop. Edward gave him his head so he could accurately assess the jump he had to make. The fence was of a respectable height but not to the large Frisian. To him, it almost fit under his belly. He flew over it with room to spare and landed smoothly. Edward had grabbed a handful of mane besides the reins to ensure he stayed on without a saddle. He'd jumped Midnight bareback before, but never a jump this size.

Seconds after they left the area lighted by the floodlights Edward knew what he'd forgotten. Midnight was going full tilt toward the lights in the distance. Edward's only point of reference and while he couldn't see the path they were going he trusted Midnight to see the obstacles. It was a moonless, cloudy night, and he couldn't see a thing just in front of them. He was glad he didn't have to go through a forest because any low hanging branch would have clobbered him unconscious at the speed they were going. If he weren't busy holding on and helping Midnight by being an active rider, he would have hit his forehead when the sound of running water hit his ears. He couldn't see the small river that was the boundary between the Cullen and Cygnet ranches, at all. He should have grabbed his helmet light to give him at least some forward vision. Now he only had the lights in the distance.

Before those thoughts had run their course through his head, Midnight jumped the river. Taking Edward completely by surprise the motion de-seated him mid-jump. He held on to the reins with a desperate grip, not wanting Midnight to bolt away from him. He had to choose while he flew above the horse. If he fell straight back down, he could injure Midnight. That was no option so he chose the lesser of two evils and angled himself to land in the water. Because he still had hold of the reins, Midnight's momentum dragged him back on dry land and brought the horse to a stop.

Edward lay on his back, soaking wet. He was glad his phone cover was

waterproof; he'd had one too many drowned phones. He stared at the pitch-black sky trying to find his breath. All sense of purpose had been knocked out of him by the impromptu flying lesson with a watery landing. He just lay, until Midnight came to check on him, nudging his shoulder with his nose. Everything came flooding back and with a groan, Edward stood up from the riverbank. He removed his shirt and wrung it out. He did the same with his jeans. Arriving at Bella's wet was okay, arriving dripping was rude. With the aid of a big boulder on the riverbank, he mounted Midnight again after thanking him for dragging him out of the river. And off they were again, full tilt toward the slowly growing lights that indicated Bella's ranch.

Bella looked at her phone, bewildered. He'd just hung up on her, he didn't give her a chance to stop him, or acquiesce for that matter. Her biting remark and the explanation she gave him clearly sent him into a tailspin. It was ridiculous how all her insecurities had exploded and popped out of existence upon the realization that he was talking about her. She walked back to the maternity stall but didn't go inside. Aurora was comfortable, and Bella didn't want to disturb her.

The wonderful man had been in his bedroom ready to go to bed after they had talked, she was sure of that. A short walk through the stables showed a lot of empty stalls. Bella sighed, sure, she made a shitload of money, but every single horse was a personal friend. When they were sold, she felt melancholy. Every foal born at the ranch was sold, and in the last few weeks, about ten of them had left.

She decided she would wait for Edward up front. She also made a quick call to the security company that a visitor would arrive shortly; that she knew him, and he was no threat, giving them his name and address to placate their paranoid state of mind. She was glad she had that specific company watching at night because they wanted to know everything. The guard on the phone laughed when he heard the name of her visitor.

"_Well,"_ he stated when he could talk again, "_I'll finally have eyes on the boss, then. Edward Masen is the owner of the company. We were told he only owns it and that a friend of his from college runs it using the boss's programs."_

That made Bella laugh too. She understood the guards thought their 'boss' strange and possibly a hermit.

"Just put him on the approved visitor list, like our vet. I suspect he'll be here often."

"_Will do, ma'am. Have a good night."_ The guard said before disconnecting.

Bella sat down on one of the benches lining the show court in front of the stable. The only thing heard were the crickets, or was it? A thunder-like sound became louder and louder, and soon she could pinpoint its origin. It was coming from behind the stable, and she was sure it was a horse. Did Edward own a horse? Could that be him? If it was, he wouldn't come to the front. Bella stood up and walked around the building, giving little attention to the racetrack the jockeys used to train. A wayward thought had her smile. As small as she was, some of the jockeys had to look up at her. Full-grown men built to be the least burden to a horse.

Bella's walk was brisk; she was almost jogging because she could hear how the horse was galloping at full speed, pounding the dirt with powerful strides to have the biggest acceleration with each impact. When she rounded the last corner, she stared into the darkness. With some effort, she could see a very big shadow moving along the back pastures. The lights that lit the direct surroundings of the stable hindered her from seeing more.

The shadow slowly took shape, definitely a rider on horseback. One on the back of an enormous black horse, a magnificent full tail trailing behind. The rider was wrapped in the flying mane. When they reached the outer edge of the lighted area, there was still a white ranch fence in their way.

Or was it?

The next thing she knew the black, shadowy horse had become a horse's head right in front of her. Just enough space between them to keep her out of its blind spot. The horse was breathing heavily from the sprint it took over the fields, his legs restless against the ground. He gave a big snort and in an unprecedented move of trust knelt in front of her, pushing its big head against her chest.

Edward didn't expect that move and once again lost his seat. He slid off to the side and landed on the ground with an "oomph". His embarrassment and self-loathing went into overdrive. He curled up into a fetal position and gave up. He only wanted to be with her as fast as possible and then his biggest friend betrayed him not once but twice on a ten-minute ride. Well, the first was mostly his own fault for forgetting his helmet light to aid his non-existent night vision. But kneeling to a stranger was a traitor move. Moreover, Bella was his, Midnight couldn't have her for his own.

He almost disappeared in his mind to escape the harsh reality that was around him. A concerned voice kept him from shutting down.

"Edward, baby, are you all right? Please, say something. Come on, nothing is wrong between us. Is this your horse? He's magnificent. You obviously know how to ride quite well. I don't know many riders who can ride a stallion bareback in the dark."

Bella touched his shoulder, and the weight of her hand on his body made his muscles relax a bit. She didn't refuse him after his awful faux pas on the phone.

"Edward! You're soaking wet, get up right now! You can't stay outside in your wet clothes all night. What happened?"

She started pulling on one of his arms. Her remark on the state of his clothes had the opposite effect, though. His arms clamped tighter around his knees, and he pressed his forehead against them for good measure.

An unresponsive ball on the ground.

He couldn't think himself out of the panic that clouded his brain. His whole body prepared itself for the impact of the belt, fist or boot he expected.

Midnight sensed something was wrong and gently pushed Bella aside. Then he stood close to Edward and after once again kneeling, he lay down with the man-turned-boy near his front. He pushed his nose between Edward's arms and legs and whinnied.

Bella recognized that Edward couldn't pull himself from whatever had made him panic. She walked cautiously around Midnight always touching him to Edward's other side. There she kneeled, and after giving the horse a scrub between his ears, she stroked Edward's hair while she began to murmur comforting sentences.

"Shhhhh, honey, it's okay." She looked at the horse and saw that the name Midnight was burned into the forehead strap of his bridle. "Midnight and I have you."

When he heard his name, Midnight snorted and pushed harder to get Edward to open up his cramped position.

"See, we're both here for you. Nothing is wrong. You didn't do anything wrong. We both love you, just the way you are."

It took them about fifteen minutes to get Edward out of his panic attack. He felt as if his limbs were made of lead. His usually sharp mind clouded by emotions, still on the edge of embarrassment. It had never happened in company before, other than his parents's—if you could call them that. He knew that the simple explanation he gave Bella about being fostered had to be expanded. The most important thing was, though, that he needed to apologize.

Bella led him into a locker room where all her staff had their personal lockers. Bella sat him down on a bench in the middle of the room and took in his appearance.

"Edward, are you a 32/34 trouser and a large shirt?"

"Huh, why? I'm a 32/32 trouser, I'm not that long legged. But you're right, large shirt, preferably with extra long sleeves because I'm more monkey than most — Long arms." He said with a tired smile.

Bella walked away to the next room, one that resembled a clothing store. Neat cubby holes with size indications held everything from jeans to breeches, T-shirts, and sweaters, plus blouses and show jackets. A separate wall held clogs, boots, gloves, and caps. She contemplated between jeans and breeches, and what would be more comfortable to sleep in. She then stepped forward and grabbed a short sleeved polo and one of the oversized sweaters, before grabbing the right size breeches. She turned to the wall that belied the store-like image of the room, it held a laundromat size washer dryer combination and big laundry baskets, each under clear signs of what to put in them. The last thing on that wall was next to the door to the bathroom, a big open cabinet filled with fluffy towels. Bella then put everything into the dryer. She knew Edward had to be cold to the bone. She was so glad that she wanted her people to look respectable and recognizable at that moment.

Before re-emerging from the clothes room, she called out to Edward. "Do you want to take a shower?"

There was no answer.

She hurriedly went back to her man, because that's what he most certainly had become in her mind. From the corner of her eye, she caught a large black presence trying to enter the locker room. She smiled. Midnight didn't want to be away from Edward it seemed. Edward, himself, lay on his back on the bench and was asleep. Bella hated that she had to wake him, but thought that a shower could wait until the next day. She still didn't know how he had gotten soaked, anyhow.

A sound from the door made Bella's focus shift from trying to wake Edward to the door, and she burst out laughing, really laughing because it was more than funny to see her least-built stable boy try to get Midnight away from the entrance. He had come to help Bella deal with what he perceived to be a problem. On the monitor, it had looked like a drunken man had ridden a horse in from the back pastures. At her calm behavior, he had seen his help wasn't needed. Until the two humans were followed by the black horse, that was.

"Midnight, let him in," Bella said to the horse. "It's okay, Seth, he's friendly but definitely a stallion and very protective of his owner," she continued.

Edward woke, uncomfortable on something hard and narrow. He was distracted from that by a small hand stroking through his hair. The electrical buzz on his scalp made him want to snuggle up and never let go. He needed something softer to lie on, though. He heard a familiar female voice speaking close by, but he couldn't place the male voice that answered. The last thing he remembered was falling in the river and having to use the boulder to mount Midnight.

What happened?

Feeling the state of his body and the muddled state of his mind, he knew he'd had an episode. He hated he still could get those debilitating panic attacks. Most of the time he could fight them off until he was alone. This one must have given no warning at all. Edward felt himself getting embarrassed again, until the strange conversation the people near him began to make sense. Apparently, Midnight had followed them inside and now wouldn't get out of the doorway. He spoke with his eyes still closed, "Midnight, back up."

His voice and the familiar command registered and the horse reacted at once taking three steps back. The small gap he created allowed Seth to crawl through into the locker room.

"Ma'am," he addressed Bella because a stranger was present, "I've opened one of the empty stalls. I think he'll like his neighbor, it's the stall next to Sara."

"Seth, meet Edward, my boyfriend. You can leave the formalities at the door and help him change, he's had quite the adventure coming here. If he'll let me, I'll put Midnight to bed?" She asked, looking at Edward with her eyebrows raised.

He sat up with a groan and looked at his black beauty of a horse. Midnight whinnied and stepped closer, he stopped at once when Edward

raised a brow. Bella and Seth watched in awe of the bond they sensed between the two. Edward grabbed Bella's hand and put it on his chest. "Go with Bella please, Midnight, it's okay. I hear she has a new friend for you." He released Bella and pushed her gently toward the horse who had lowered his head to once again be accessible to her. His human found a mate. He approved. She was a horse person.

Bella grabbed the reins and backed Midnight carefully up and out of the narrow corridor. Well, narrow for an eighteen-hand stallion; humans could easily walk with three side by side. She turned him around, and he followed every little tug on the reins. When they passed the tack room, Bella pulled him to a stop. Somehow, he clearly wanted to show his skill and stood with both sets of legs straight beneath the joints, tail slightly lifted, to show off its fullness, neck and head in a beautiful arc, nose down to the ground. It was almost as if he was preening. Bella stroked his neck and gave him a hug before darting into the tack room to grab a halter and lead rope. She put the halter on loosely before removing the bridle with practiced moves. Midnight still wanted to impress her with his manners and didn't move a muscle when she cleaned his bridle and hung it to dry in the tack room on the peg that corresponded with the stall Seth had prepared for him.

To give the men some extra time Bella grabbed a brush set and gave Midnight a quick brush down. When she did his neck, he practically swooned and hung his head over her shoulder. He liked how she made sure to catch all the itchy spots. After Edward, this human was fast becoming his favorite.

She grabbed an apple and a bucket of kibble before she grabbed the lead rope and led him to a stall in the huge stable. Midnight wasn't used to a stall with so many other horses he could smell. He'd always been stabled separately because Edward wanted him close. His neighbor smelled fantastic, though. She was asleep and only half aware of the fact she now had company.

Bella gave Midnight the apple and dumped the kibble in the crib that was right next to the automatic watering system. She stayed with him until she could sense he started to relax. With the last stroke of his nose, she left to let him rest. He wandered over to Sara's side of his stall and leaned against the wall resting two of his legs at once while being as close as possible to the mare he wanted to get to know in the morning.

Meanwhile, in the locker room, Seth had fished the now warm towels and clothes from the dryer and offered them to Edward. Still very groggy from the panic attack, Edward undressed on auto pilot. He'd have to go commando, because underwear was the only thing Bella couldn't provide. She'd chosen their softest breeches to accommodate that fact.

Seth stayed close and made sure that Edward wouldn't topple over. He'd never seen the boss lady act so tenderly toward a person. Toward animals, she was endlessly patient and tender when the moment dictated. Humans, on the other hand, could drive her up a wall within minutes. Especially those scary women that had only come to the stable once to collect Bella, while she was shoulder deep into a mare to confirm pregnancy. Their fluorescent-green outfits had spooked the mare—almost breaking the boss lady's shoulder. She had towed the screeching scarecrows out of the stable, and everybody had held their

breath while the boss lady ripped them a new one.

Seth helped Edward into the sweatshirt like he was a toddler. Head first and threading the arms into the sleeves by putting his hand the wrong way up them and grabbing Edward's hand. He was just finished when he heard Bella return.

"Could you please add another row of hay bales to my bed in Aurora's stall? I think I need to stay close to both of them. Oh, don't forget to put an extra bale at the end. I fit, but a six foot four man will not."

"Of course, Bella."

"Thanks, Seth."

"Bella?"

"Yes?"

"I'll be right back to help you to get him there. His balance is a little shaky. He must have taken quite the tumble; his back is beginning to become black and blue. Just keep him company for now."

Their whispered conversation was cut short by a groan from Edward, who was trying to find a comfortable position on the narrow bench once again. He simply didn't have the energy to move anymore. Seth high-tailed it out of there to see to the arrangements. Bella went into the locker room and sat next to Edward's head. With gentle determination, she coaxed him into a sitting position.

"Honey, we're going to help you to my makeshift bed in a little while. Please, try and stay awake until we're there."

"Mmm, 'kay," he said, leaning into her touch.

They sat side by side in companionable silence. Edward reveled in her touch, while fighting off the cloud of sleepiness that threatened to overtake him.

"I'll tell you what happened after we've slept. Okay?" Edward spoke in a whisper. "Right now, all that would come out is nonsense."

"It's okay, Edward. I'm aware that a panic attack takes a lot out of you. Mine usually are an explosion of rage. Afterward, I need to sleep for days, at least that's what it feels like. I'll listen if you want to tell me. But there will be no pressure and absolutely no judgment over your plight. Character is built on life's setbacks."

Edward didn't say anything but he cuddled closer to her and nodded into her shoulder. They went back to just being together. Bella wondered over the fact that they hadn't even known each other for a day. While sitting there, it felt as if they'd been together forever. Comfortable and right. She smiled.

Misunderstandings such as they'd had on the phone would be par for the course of getting to know each other. She'd been put down for

nine years, and even if she'd fought against it, it was bound to have left its scars on her self-esteem. Her sweet, sweet man had his own demons in his past. It was obvious that what he had told her was just the tip of the iceberg.

She was brought out of her musings by Seth's return. Gently she made sure that Edward was awake and aware what was going to happen.

Seth and Bella helped Edward to his feet and hobbled out of the locker room. Bella worried that the trek to the maternity stable would be too much for Edward, he was clearly exhausted. When they turned around after having shuffled sideways out of the door, a startled laugh left Bella. Seth beamed at her around Edward, who hadn't seen what Seth had done yet because he was concentrating on getting his feet to cooperate with walking.

In the middle of the corridor stood the electric, mini lorry they used in the stable to distribute the food. The bed, normally empty was now padded with a thick layer of horse blankets.

Edward saw the lorry and his ears flamed red, he mumbled to himself, "What's the point of this, I'm such a failure ... Can't even walk by myself. My girl needs to haul my ass around like a bale of hay. Some apology!"

Because he mumbled close to Bella's ear, slumped over her shoulder as he was, she heard that statement perfectly. Together with Seth, she deposited Edward on the bed of blankets, thanked Seth for his services and waited until he had left the stable.

"Edward Masen! Stop this right now. I know it wasn't your goal to hurt me, you didn't know any better! I didn't even know that I had those insecurities, and I'll be working on that. It's just that everybody that ever meant anything significant to me left me to fend for myself. Now, your race to get here, and getting to know that magnificent horse of yours was apology enough. Just so you know, I'm sorry, too. Let's go and get some sleep."

Edward could only nod in response. He was in awe of the strength of his woman. She walked around the lorry, climbed in the driver's seat and drove them to the maternity stable.

"Now, we need to be quiet. Aurora is ready to foal and high strung. Seth has gone to bed. That means you'll have to bear most of your own weight."

All lethargy forgotten, Edward scooted from the back of the lorry, and with only a hand on Bella's shoulder to keep his balance, walked into the stall. His ears once again flamed when he saw the setup Seth had organized. A large bed of hay bales topped with a straw mattress, pillows, and an actual comforter; although, the comforter might have already been there. His nerves resurfaced, and he whispered to Bella in embarrassment, "Bella, I've never shared a bed with anyone. I mean to sleep."

"Well, that's going to change now, honey," Bella whispered. "Please take the wall side; I need to be able to get up if Aurora gets restless."

Edward stumbled onto the remarkable bouncy floor covering the

maternity stall. Aurora lifted her head and turned herself toward the stranger walking into her stall. One look at the exhausted man was enough for her to settle once again. That human wasn't able to do anything to her.

Edward crawled onto the make-shift bed and shuffled over to the far side. His back and tired limbs thanked him for finding a soft surface for them to rest on. He was out for the count before his head hit the pillow.

Bella took a few minutes with Aurora, the mare happy with the attention and the scratch on some notoriously itchy spots. After a look at her watchâ€”three AMâ€”Bella finally snuggled up to Edward and fell into a contented, yet light sleep.

A/N This is the last chapter completed for this compilation.

I hope the cliffie isn't too bad. As soon as I can, I'll continue Dancing Queen and it will be posted on my profile. I hope you'll all continue the journey along with Geniusward and Amazonella.

So put it on alert!

There will be more dancing, more poignant moments, more hilarious situations with the rainbow twins, and some stupid Renee moments. We'll finish at a large gala, or is it?

Pienuniek.

End
file.